

Literacy in the Byzantine World

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The historian Nicephorus Gregoras, writing of the Patriarch Athanasios I, dismisses him scathingly as ἀδαής τῆς τῶν γραμμάτων παιδείας.¹ Yet we know that Athanasius, who came from the countryside near Adrianople,² was reading the Lives of Saints before the age of twelve.³ And his surviving writings—homilies, encyclicals, canonical decisions, letters, etc.—fill the 204 folios of codex Vaticanus graecus 2219. Most of these writings still await publication. But the recent edition by Mrs. Alice-Mary Talbot of 115 of Athanasios' letters⁴ shows that he wrote fluent literary Koine Greek, without the archaizing affectations of Byzantine Atticism and with occasional voluntary or involuntary lapses into the spoken language of his time. He was no stylist: for him it was the matter, not the manner, that counted. He had little acquaintance with classical Greek literature. But in addition to the Scriptures, which he constantly quotes, he was familiar with the more widely read works of the fourth-century fathers, knew the basic texts of civil and canon law, and could quote the *Epanagoge*.⁵ Clearly he was no illiterate, but a professional user of the written word.

1. Nicephorus Gregoras, *Byzantine Historia*, I, p. 180 (CSHB).

2. George Pachymeres, *De Andronico Palaeologo*, II, p. 139 (CSHB).

3. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, 'Žitija dvukh vselenskikh patriarkhov xiv v., svv. Afanasija I i Isidora I', *Zapiski istoriko-filologičeskago fakul'teta S.-Peterburgskago Universiteta*, 76 (1965), 3–4.

4. Alice-Mary M. Talbot, *The Correspondence of Athanasius I Patriarch of Constantinople. Letters to the Emperor Andronicus II, Members of the Imperial Family, and Officials* (Dumbarton Oaks Texts, III [Washington, 1975]).

5. Talbot, op. cit., p. xxix.

This instance reminds us, if indeed we need reminding, how cautious we must be in accepting loose statements about the educational attainments of Byzantines who had not pursued the élitist study of literature and rhetoric, a study which at most periods was possible only in the capital, and which was never accessible to more than a few. In his superb study of Byzantine culture Paul Lemerle suggests that some 200 to 300 boys were receiving a literary education at any one time in the middle of the tenth century, all in Constantinople.⁶ However one converts this figure into an index of the proportion of the total population, or of the adult population, who enjoyed a higher education, that proportion will turn out to be infinitesimally small. Dealing with a later period Ihor Ševčenko recently calculated that there were in the middle of the fourteenth century about 100 identifiable men of letters in the Byzantine Empire, and suggested that the total of all those with a higher literary education was correspondingly small.⁷

These figures are interesting, and must be taken seriously by all students of Byzantine culture. I think myself that they are probably too low. Moreover, what is being counted is the number of those who were trained for a career in the central bureaucracies of Church and State, for whom the study of literature and rhetoric was often a means of social mobility. Yet we know—and A. P. Každan has recently reminded us of the fact⁸—that the ruling class in the middle Byzantine period included many families who did not pursue official or ecclesiastical careers, but whose members were certainly fully literate. A good example would be Kekaumenos. We must not confuse functional literacy with the ability to manipulate the Atticizing literary language and its complex universe of reference and allusion. What I will try to do in this paper is to look at the problem of how many Byzantines, and which, could read and write. All I can offer is a preliminary survey of the field and a classification of the kind of evidence which may help us to find an answer. The full exploitation of that evidence, if it turns

6. P. Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin* (Paris, 1971), pp. 255–7.

7. I. Ševčenko, 'Society and Intellectual Life in the Fourteenth Century', *XIV^e Congrès International des Études Byzantines, Bucarest 1971, Rapports*, I, pp. 7ff.

8. A. P. Každan, *Sotsijal'nyj sostav gosподstvuyuščego klassa Vizantii XI–XII vekov* (Moscow, 1974), *passim*.

out to be worth studying, will be for a later occasion and will call for the co-operative work of a number of scholars.

Mass literacy and mass communication are modern phenomena, for which the existence of printing and the paper industry are necessary, though not sufficient, conditions. Carlo Cipolla has shown how very recently the ability to read and write became general even in the advanced industrial countries of western Europe.⁹ In the middle ages we cannot expect to find the kind of statistical material which Cipolla uses to trace the growth of literacy. Our evidence must be more fragmentary, our interpretation of it more impressionistic. Yet that evidence is of many different kinds, and if it is interpreted with due caution can lead us to preliminary conclusions of some plausibility.

First let us look at some general considerations, before turning to particular cases. Throughout its history the Byzantine Empire required large numbers of literate persons for its administration. In this respect it resembled the Muslim Caliphate¹⁰ rather than the Christian states of central and western Europe in the middle ages. Every theme had its *strategos* or its *krites*, who had under him a series of departments, each with its staff of clerks and copyists. In each major city there was a subordinate of the governor of the theme, who in turn had his staff.¹¹ I need not remind readers of the multitude of officials concerned with the assessment and collection of taxes of every kind, whom we encounter in surviving Byzantine archives, in the tenth-century treatise on taxation edited by Dölger, and in the great collections of Byzantine seals. The continuing functioning of such a system of administration presupposes a regular supply of men who read and wrote with ease, though most of them certainly did not possess a classical literary education, and many of them may rarely, if ever, have opened a book. The Church, too, needed men who could read and write, and in very considerable numbers, all over the Empire. Apart from the

9. C. Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Harmondsworth, 1969).

10. G. E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam. A Study in Cultural Orientation*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1953), pp. 159–69.

11. J. B. Bury, *The Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century* (London, 1911); Hélène Glykatzi-Ahrweiler, 'Recherches sur l'administration de l'empire byzantin aux ix^e-xi^e siècles', *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*, LXXXIV (1960), 1–109.

higher clergy, priests had in theory to be literate in order to carry out their professional duties. The knowledge of some of them may well have been limited. But it is significant that there is nothing in the history of the Orthodox church comparable with medieval western discussions of the validity of baptism in bad Latin, or with the story of the priest who found himself owing his bishop 100 sheep instead of 100 eggs because of his ignorance of grammar.¹² Most monks seem to have been able to read—we shall come back to this point later—and they formed a not insignificant part of the population.

Another general argument is that drawn from the stereotype of the saint. Most Byzantine saints could read and write. Sometimes we are given an account of their education—and we shall look at some of these later—sometimes their literacy emerges incidentally, when we find them writing a letter or reading an edifying book. Of only a few is it expressly stated that they were illiterate. And some of these turn out to be non-Greeks, Syrians like St. Symeon the Stylite or his imitator St. Daniel the Stylite, or Slavs, like St. Joannicius, men who in their childhood would not have attended a Greek school anyway. The saint represented one of the ideal types in accordance with which Byzantine life was conducted. It is unlikely that holy men would be represented as so generally literate if reading and writing were arts inaccessible to the average man who looked to the saints as models.

But it is now time to turn to more detailed examination of particular types of evidence and particular cases. First, the ownership of books. No doubt most books in private possession belonged either to members of the small group of the classically educated, or to the clergy. But there are many instances of book-ownership among other strata of the population. For instance, military men. An example which springs to the mind is that of Kekaumenos, who not only owned books but wrote them, although he certainly did not belong to the metropolitan group of the classically educated.¹³ Then ownership inscriptions on

12. To take only a single example, the *Registrum Visitationum* of Odo, Archbishop of Rouen (ed, Bonnin, Paris, 1852), gives a depressing picture of the state of education of the clergy in northern France in the middle of the thirteenth century.

13. On Kekaumenos' family and social position cf. most recently G. G.

manuscripts reveal many other senior officers who owned, and presumably read, books. There follow a few examples resulting from a random search. Nicetas, *spatharios* and former *drugarios* of the fleet, copied in 971 a manuscript of Saint Basil while in captivity in Africa.¹⁴ George, *vestarchēs* and *droungarios tēs viglēs* owned a Gospel lectionary in 1049, and signed his name in the firm and flowing hand of an accomplished writer.¹⁵ Pakourianos, *patrikios* and *stratēgos* of Samos—who may or may not be identical with the founder of the great monastery at Bačkovo—owned a handsome manuscript of St. Basil's Homilies on the Psalms, which had earlier belonged to another military man, Theudatos, *patrikios* and *stratēgos* of Opsikion.¹⁶ A manuscript of Theophylact on the Gospels, now in the Laurentian Library in Florence, was written in 1284, probably in Asia Minor, for Michael—the family name is illegible—*megas archōn* of Anatolia and *kephalē* of Rhodes and the Cyclades, an office first created under the Nicaean empire.¹⁷ A manuscript of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus, written in 1258/9 and now in the Ambrosian Library was written for Theodosios Sisinnēs, *megalyperochos archōn*.¹⁸ It is not clear whether the holder of this mysterious office was a soldier or a civilian. But there is no doubt of the military status of his contemporary John Komnenos Synadenos, *megas stratopedarchēs*, owner of a manuscript of Gregory of Nazianzus, now in the Vatican, and of a Heavenly Ladder, now in Paris. This man was married to

Litavrin, *Sovety i rasskazy Kekavmena* (Moscow, 1972), pp. 49–61. On his education cf. his own remarks §76 (p. 272 Litavrin). On his high regard for books cf. §46 (p. 212 Litavrin).

14. Montfaucon, *Palaeographia Graeca*, p. 45.

15. Note on fly-leaf of Gospel Lectionary at present in the possession of a dealer; photograph kindly supplied by Mrs. A. Muthesius.

Ἐδόθη παρὰ γεωργίου βεσάρχου καὶ δρουγγαρίου τῆς βίβλης εἰς μῆνα . . . τρίτην ἰνδικτιῶνος . . . ἐν ἔτει τῷ ςφνζ . . . κων(σταν)τ(ίνου) μ(ε)γ(άλου) βασιλ(έως) καὶ αὐτο [κράτορος] τοῦ μονομάχου σὺν . . . Θεοδώρα τῶν πορφυρο [γεννήτων].

16. Montfaucon, *Palaeographia Graeca*, p. 46. I have not succeeded in identifying this manuscript, which in Montfaucon's day was in the 'Bibliotheca s. Justinae' in Padua.

17. A. Turyn, *Dated Greek Manuscripts of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries in the Libraries of Italy* (Urbana, 1972), I, p. 48.

18. Turyn, op. cit., p. 19.

Theodora, daughter of Michael VIII's younger brother the Sebastokrator Constantine Palaiologos, and was an uncle of both John VI Kantakuzenos and of Andronikos III. He commanded armies in Thessaly and Albania between 1275 and 1285. In the ownership inscriptions in his two surviving books he boasts that no man has so extensive a library, that he exhausts all his riches in buying religious books, and that he desires to possess a copy of every such book.¹⁹ And finally among military bibliophiles there is George Palaiologos Kantakuzenos, great-grandson of John VI, soldier in the Peloponnese and later on the banks of the Danube in the middle of the fifteenth century, whose library at Kalavryta Cyriac of Ancona visited in 1436, borrowing from it among other books a text of Herodotus. He apparently took his library with him to Smederevo, as a Procopius now in the Vatican was acquired by him there in 1454.²⁰ None of these men is likely to have studied under grammarian or rhetorician, but they were readers of books. Indeed they had to be, since according to Constantine Porphyrogenitus manuals of strategy, meteorology, and interpretation of dreams, formed part of the official equipment of a Byzantine military commander.²¹

We may now turn to a few civil officials who were owners of books, although they are unlikely to have enjoyed the highest type of classical education. The *prōtopatharios* and *hypatos* Eustathios Boilas, whose will, written on his Armenian estate in 1059, lists the books in his library, is too well known to need further discussion.²² Boilas was not unique. A twelfth-century manuscript of Pseudo-Oecumenius on the Pauline Epistles, now in the Vatican, belonged to Romanos Genesios *prōtopatharios*, *kritēs epi tou Hippodromou tou Bēlou* and *stratiōtikos logothetēs*. It later passed into the possession of one Michael Cappadox, who in the thirteenth century added a list of

19. D. M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Family of Kantakouzenos* (Washington, 1968), p. 34; D. I. Polemis, *The Doukai* (London, 1968), pp. 179–80.

20. Nicol, *op. cit.*, pp. 176–9; E. W. Bodnar, *Cyriacus of Ancona and Athens* (Brussels, 1960), p. 42.

21. *De caerimoniis*, I, p. 467 (CSHB).

22. Greek text published by V. N. Benešević, *Žurnal Ministerstva Narodnago Prosvēšeniia* (May 1907), 218–31; English translation by S. Vryonis, Jr., 'The Will of a Provincial Magnate, Eustathius Boilas (1059)', *DOP*, XI (1957), 263–77. See additional note below, p. 54.

the books in his library.²³ An eleventh century manuscript of homilies by John Chrysostom and the Cappadocian Fathers, now in the Vatican, was written to the order of the *prōtospatharios* Nikolaos Pothos.²⁴ A volume of saints' lives in the Vatican belonged in the twelfth or thirteenth century to the *spatharios* Constantine Krambonetes.²⁵ An eleventh-century manuscript of Gregory of Nazianzus was given to the Monastery of Studios in Constantinople by Nikolaos, *primikērios* and *archōn* of the Mint.²⁶ A collection of dogmatic and polemic works written at the beginning of the fourteenth century was bought in the fifteenth by the *prōtonotarios* of Kastoria for forty new aspra.²⁷ A volume of canon law, now in the Escorial, belonged, probably in the thirteenth century, to Georgitzes Myrepsos, who describes himself as *archōn*.²⁸ A manuscript of the Iliad now in Milan belonged in the fourteenth century to Constantine Lukites, *prōtonotarios* and *prōtovesiarios* of the Emperor of Trebizond. Lukites informs us that he was born in Macedonia and educated in Constantinople before migrating to Trebizond, where he acquired *πολλὰι πυκτίδες*.²⁹ A letter addressed to him is preserved in the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna in cod. Vindobonensis theologicus Gr. 203, fol. 23–34. It appears to be unpublished.

Then there are laymen of uncertain status who owned books, such as Theodore Lithopyrgites, who received on 1 October 1290 as a betrothal gift from his future father-in-law a manuscript of the Etymologikon of Symeon, which later belonged to Politian,³⁰ or Demetrios Kassandrenos, companion of John VI Kantakuzenos who accompanied him in 1361 to his retirement in Mistra, where he had a copy of Plutarch's Lives written for him: his was a family of bibliophiles, since his son-

23. R. Devreesse, *Codices Vaticani Graeci*, III (Vatican City, 1950), p. 280.

24. R. Devreesse, *Codices Vaticani Graeci*, II (Vatican City, 1937), pp. 427–30.

25. C. Giannelli, *Codices Vaticani Graeci*, VI (Vatican City, 1950), pp. 279–81.

26. Giannelli, *op. cit.*, pp. 438–41.

27. R. Devreesse, *Codices Vaticani Graeci*, III (Vatican City, 1950), pp. 111–13.

28. G. de Andrés, *Catálogo de los códices griegos de la Real Biblioteca de el Escorial*, II (Madrid, 1965), pp. 274–8. It is not at all clear what position, if any, Georgitzes held. Archon may be a social rather than a political term.

29. Ae. Martini, D. Bassi, *Catalogus codicum Graecorum Bibliothecae Ambrosianae* (Milan, 1906), I, p. 557.

30. Turyn, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–9.

in-law Nikephoros Angelos Kanabes is recorded as the owner of a copy of a New Testament and Psalms, copied in 1364, now in Paris.³¹ And last but not least there are the women who owned books. A good example is Theodora Palaiologina Kantakuzene Raoulaina, who died in 1300. In spite of her blue blood she wrote manuscripts with her own hand, one of which, containing the works of Aelius Aristides, survives in the Vatican.³²

Clearly book-ownership and the habit of reading spread far beyond the somewhat narrow circle of clergy and teachers, for whom literacy was a professional requirement. We need only recall that all Byzantine Emperors, with the possible exceptions of Justin I and Basil I, could read and write, and that many of them were authors, although none is likely to have had a literary and rhetorical education of the classical type. How did such men learn to read and write? Sometimes, among the richer classes, it was from a private tutor hired by their parents. In the *Miracle of Sts. Kosmas and Damian* there is a story of a *scriniarius* at the *praitōrion ton eparchōn*, who employed a private teacher to teach his son at home.³³ But more often it was in an elementary school perhaps followed by study under a *grammatikos*. It is true that the provision of public higher education in the cities of the empire broke down in the early Byzantine period in the course of the decline in and transformation of city life. It is true that throughout most of the middle and later Byzantine period a full literary education was obtainable only in the capital, and there only by a few, as Lemerle argues. But a school is a very simple institution. All it requires is a teacher, a room, and a book. And it can probably dispense with the last. Elementary schools of this simple pattern continued to exist for much of the time in many of the cities, and sometimes even in villages, ensuring a far more widespread functional literacy than was to be found in the west. One of the stock situations described in the lives of Byzantine saints—the only Byzantines whose lives we can sometimes follow from cradle to grave—is that of the young man who learns to read in his native city or village, acquires a taste for learning, and goes to Constantinople to obtain a higher education. Examples are Constantine-Cyril, the future apostle of

31. Turyn, op. cit., pp. 229–30; Nicol, op. cit., p. 144.

32. Nicol, op. cit., pp. 16–18.

33. L. A. Deubner, *Kosmas and Damian* (Leipzig–Berlin, 1907), pp. 77–9.

the Slavs, who learns to read in Thessalonika, finds difficulty in understanding the Fathers of the Church, and goes on to Constantinople to study grammar and Homer,³⁴ or Abraamios, the future St. Athanasios of Athos, who attended the school of the *grammatistēs* at Trebizond and only later, thanks to the patronage of a government official, went on to complete his education in the capital.³⁵ We may be sure that most of these distinguished men's fellow pupils remained in their native cities, content with a modest ability to read and write. They form the base of the pyramid of which Constantine-Cyril and Athanasios were the apex. Let us look at some of the evidence for the widespread existence of elementary schools like those attended by Constantine-Cyril and Athanasios, beginning with the larger provincial cities, and working down to villages. St. Andrew of Crete, who died in 740, was born in Damascus, was dumb from birth, suddenly acquired speech at the age of seven, was at once sent to school to study *ta peza grammata*, and then went on to *ta hysēlotera mathēmata*, which is explained as meaning grammar.³⁶ In near-by Jerusalem, almost a century later, Michael Syncellus was sent to school by his parents to study *ta tēs propaideias grammata*, before going on to study grammar, rhetoric and philosophy.³⁷ It might be argued that the educational patterns of late antiquity survived better in cities under Muslim rule than in those still under Byzantine sovereignty, which were long harassed by Arab or Slav attacks. But the examples of Trebizond and Thessalonika suggest that this is not always the case. So do those of Amastris, where the future St. George went to school in the middle of the eighth century,³⁸ and where the son of a soldier, registered in the *katalogos* of the army, who later takes over his father's military obligations and is captured by the Bulgarians, was in his childhood assiduous in the study of letters.³⁹ Or of Adrianople, where the future Patriarch

34. A. Vaillant, *Textes vieux-slaves, I: Textes et glossaire* (Paris, 1968), p. 27.

35. I. Pomjajlovskij, *Žitie prepodobnago Afanasija Afonskago* (St. Petersburg, 1895), pp. 4–5.

36. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Analekta Hierosolymitikēs stachyologias*, V (St. Petersburg, 1898), p. 171.

37. F. I. Smit, 'Kakhrie-Džami I, Priloženie 1', *IRAİK*, XI (1906), 228.

38. V. G. Vasil'evskij, *Russko-vizantijskija izsledovanija* (St. Petersburg, 1893), pp. 74–5.

39. J. B. Aufhauser, *Miracula S. Georgii* (Leipzig, 1913), p. 20.

Athanasios, whom we met earlier in the present discussion, read as a child the Old and New Testaments and the Life of St. Alypios.⁴⁰ Or Eirenopolis in Isauria, where in 850 Gregory the Decapolite was sent to school at the age of eight to learn *ta prōta stoicheia*.⁴¹ Or Nicaea, where the future St. Christodoulos of Patmos learned to read and write in the early eleventh century.⁴² Or in Caesarea in Cappadocia, where in the ninth century St. Eudokimos was sent by his parents to *paidagōgoi* and *paideutai* to learn *ta logika*.⁴³ Or Mitylene, where St. David, who was apparently a peasant's son, and guarded *ta thremmata* along with the other boys, was sent to school to study *ta hiera grammata*, a phrase often used in such contexts, and explained as meaning the propaideia and the Psalms.⁴⁴ Or the village of Mossyna near Sykeon, in Bithynia, where a certain Philumenos was elementary schoolmaster in the middle of the seventh century.⁴⁵ Now the education of the future holy man is a literary topos. No doubt some of these stories from hagiography are apocryphal. But they cannot have represented something impossible or even out of the ordinary. Much more work remains to be done in collecting and critically examining the evidence, and above all in distinguishing between different regions and different periods. But a preliminary inference is that in provincial cities, and sometimes even outside cities, elementary schools were likely to exist, at which the sons of the upper classes and also of many who did not belong to that category might acquire functional literacy, without pretension to the kind of advanced literary education needed by aspirants to high positions in civil service and church. As for the capital itself, there is no doubt that as well as the official or unofficial schools where grammar and rhetoric were taught there were many teachers of lower status. St. Stephen the Younger, who died in 754, was the son of Constantinopolitan parents of modest situation, by whom he

40. Talbot, op. cit., p. xxix.

41. F. Dvornik, *Vie de S. Grégoire le Décapolite et les slaves macédoniens au IX^e siècle* (Paris, 1926), p. 47.

42. Ed. I. Sakkelion, in C. Boines, *Ἀκολουθία τερὰ τοῦ ὁσίου καὶ θεοφύρου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Χριστοδοῦλου*, ed. 3^a (Athens, 1884), App. p. 3.

43. Ch. M. Loparev 'Žitie sv. Evdokima' *IRAİK*, XIII (1908), 201.

44. *AB*, XVIII (1899), 214.

45. A. I. Festugière, *Vie de Théodore de Sykéon* (Brussels, 1970), I, p. 23.

was sent to learn *ta hiera grammata* at the age of six.⁴⁶ Symeon the New Theologian as a child about the beginning of the eleventh century attended a school in Constantinople, but appears to have known virtually nothing of the classical literature taught by grammarians and rhetoricians.⁴⁷ Many other examples could be cited.

All this seems to indicate a rather wider spread of functional literacy than has generally been supposed. No doubt it was largely confined to the cities and to the monasteries. The countryside was probably as illiterate throughout the Byzantine period as it was when Justinian in his 73rd Novel observed that it was hard to find persons in *ta chōria* who could write or witness documents.⁴⁸ But let us remember that even in the dark eighth century the *Ecloga* regarded written wills as normal, required three separate written documents for a marriage contract, insisted on witnesses to the manumission of a slave signing their names, and required a *transactio* to be in written form and signed by three witnesses although Justinianic law permitted oral *transactiones*.⁴⁹ And in the eleventh century the *Peira* constantly mentions the production of written documents, almost always signed by the parties concerned. In one case the authenticity of a document is challenged because Hellas was written with one lambda. The property-owning class, who were not necessarily either rich or city-dwellers, seem to have often been literate.

If we look at surviving Byzantine documents we find in general that prelates, state functionaries and most monks sign their names, while most other parties make a cross. Thus in an Athonite document of 991 fifteen monks sign *oikeia cheiri*, while three make a cross.⁵⁰ In a document of 1085 three clerics and two officials sign their names, while three laymen make a cross.⁵¹ In the Lembiotissa documents of the thirteenth century, so far as can be judged from the surviving cartulary, clerics and officials

46. MPG, C, col. 1081.

47. I. Hausherr, *Un grand mystique byzantin. Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (949–1022) par Nicéas Stéthatos* (Rome, 1928), p. 2.

48. *Imp. Iustiniani Novella*, 73 cap. 9.

49. *Ecloga*, 2.4, 8.1, 15.1.

50. *Actes de Lavra*, I, ed. P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, N. Svoronos (Archives de l'Āthos, V [Paris, 1970]), no. 9.

51. *Actes de Lavra*, no. 47.

sign, private citizens make a cross. But there are many exceptions to this rule. Two distinguished ladies sign with their own hands in the Lembiotissa cartulary, Irene Branaina and Irene *protovestiarissa* (Nos. 225, 233). In a document of 1008 a householder in Radochosta near Hierissos signs by name.⁵² In 1014 an *apodrungarios*, apparently living near Hierissos, signs by name.⁵³ In a document of 1097 a furrier in Thessalonika signs by name.⁵⁴ In a document of 1056 the donator and his wife, both peasants, make a cross, but their two sons sign their names.⁵⁵ These examples could easily be multiplied. In the twelfth century typikon of a confraternity in Naupaktos 20 sign their names (of whom 17 are priests or monks and 3 are laymen), 29 make a cross (of whom 1 monk, 25 laymen, 3 women).⁵⁶ In connection with the monks who sign their names it is worth reflecting that most of them must have learnt to read and write before adopting the religious life. Even today it is not easy for an adult to learn his letters. In the Byzantine world it called for the intervention of a saint and was looked on as a miracle.⁵⁷ This is further evidence for the prevalence of elementary schools in the provinces.

When we look at the signatures in Byzantine documents, we are struck by the differences in styles of writing used. Some signatories use a flowing and easy minuscule, others use a well formed majuscule hand, others again draw the letters painfully and one by one. For instance in a document of 991, to which reference has already been made, seven monks sign in minuscule hand and eight in capitals of varying degrees of awkwardness.⁵⁸ In a document of 1016 there is an extraordinary

52. *Actes de Lavra*, no. 14.

53. *Actes de Lavra*, no. 18. On the title cf. K. Amantos, 'Αποδρουγγάριος, *Ἑλληνικά*, IX (1936), 220.

54. *Actes de Lavra*, no. 53.

55. *Actes de Dionysiou*, ed. N. Oikonomidès (Archives de l'Athos, IV [Paris, 1968]), pp. 40–2.

56. J. Nesbitt and J. Wiita, 'A Confraternity of the Comnenian era', *BZ*, LXVIII (1975), 360–84.

57. For examples cf. Basil of Seleucia, *MPG*, LXXXV, col. 617 D (a married woman learns to read); *Hist. Mon.*, 6.20ff (a man of mature years learns to read).

58. *Actes de Lavra*, no. 9.

range of hands among the 22 signatories—all monks—ranging from the practised minuscule of the professional scribe to the most helpless ill-formed capitals.⁵⁹ In general prelates and officials from the eleventh century onwards sign in minuscules, though all were clearly not practised writers. But there are unexpected exceptions. And some writers, like the deacon who signed along with the furrier in 1097, use minuscule letters but write them separately like capitals.⁶⁰ We do not know how Byzantine schoolmasters taught their pupils reading and writing. But it is likely that they began by teaching the invariable majuscule forms, and only when some fluency had been reached in the writing of these went on to the minuscule hand with its variant forms and ligatures. There are likely to have been many, whose education had not gone beyond the most elementary stage, who could read only capital letters, others who may have made a shot at reading the minuscule hand of books and documents but could write only in capitals. This is the explanation of the mysterious enactment of Basil I, reported by the Continuators of Theophanes and by John Skylitzes, that tax documents should have all fractions written out in full in *lita grammata*, which even rustics could read.⁶¹ Atsalos has recently argued convincingly that *lita grammata* means uncial or majuscule writing;⁶² at any rate it implies that ‘simple’ letters could often be read by peasants in the ninth century.

So we must not think of a clear-cut distinction between those who could read and write and those who could not, but rather of a spectrum ranging from the man who could painfully read a notice or sign his name in capital letters to the man who was fully at home in the complex linguistic and literary tradition associated with the Atticist Hochsprache. And we must reckon with fairly widespread possibilities of acquiring some degree of literacy, at any rate in the urban communities of the empire. This widespread opportunity of literacy is perhaps borne out by the numerous magical and religious practices connected with learning to read and write, which suggest that it was an

59. *Actes de Lavra*, no. 19.

60. *Actes de Lavra*, no. 53.

61. Theophanes Continuatus, p. 261, ll. 6ff. (*CSHB*); Cedrenus, II, p. 204, ll. 17ff. (*CSHB*).

62. B. Atsalos, *La terminologie du livre-manuscrit à l'époque byzantine I: Termes désignant le livre-manuscrit et l'écriture* (Thessalonike, 1971), pp. 217–29.

experience not limited to a tiny élite. Magical formulae full of fantastic names of angels—Didaktikos, Koryphoblepōn, Sophōtatos and the like were written on paper, mixed with consecrated wine and given to drink to the slow reader and writer to assist his progress.⁶³ Astrologers were often called upon to advise on the most auspicious day to begin school.⁶⁴ The Euchologion—not all the material of which is strictly Byzantine, of course—contains a number of prayers concerned with elementary schools and their pupils, such as:

Εὐχή όταν ἀπέρχεται παιδίον μανθάνειν τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα; Εὐχή εἰς τὸ μανθάνειν παντοῖα ἱερὰ γράμματα; Ἀκολουθία εἰς παιδὸς κακοσκοπούς which begins *τοὺς ἀγραμμάτους μαθητὰς τὸ πνεῦμά σου τὸ ἅγιον παιδεύτῃς ἀνέδειξε* and ends by calling on God *ἐξαπόστειλον τὸ πνεῦμά σου τὸ ἅγιον ἐπὶ τὸ παρὸν παιδίον, τὸ δεῖνα, καὶ ἐμφύτευσον εἰς τὰ ὄτα τῆς καρδίας αὐτοῦ τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα*. And we must not forget the Byzantine school children's song published by Paul Maas as 'Chelidonisma der römischen Knaben' in *BZ*, XXI (1912), 43ff., which curiously enough survives only in Latin characters. The fourteenth-century monk Joseph Bryennios mentions children who reproached their parents for not sending them to school.⁶⁵ The barefoot school child in the Ptochoprodromic poems clearly did not belong to the more comfortably off strata of Byzantine society.

It is time to sum up some of the conclusions of this provisional study. The first is that far more people had access to literacy than has generally been supposed, though not all to the same degree. The situation is very different from that of most western medieval societies, where the literate formed an estate and a sociological group distinguished by their whole pattern of life from the non-literate mass. They were *clerici*, who were not all monks or priests, but might be poor students, wanderers, dropouts, but still *clerici*.⁶⁶ In Byzantine society the ability to read

63. A. Vasil'ev, *Anecdota Graecobyzantina* (Moscow, 1893), p. 342.

64. *Catalogus codicum astrologorum graecorum* (Brussels, 1898–1952), 3.3.34, 4.142.3, 5.3.91, 8.1.204, etc.

65. E. Voulgaris, *Ἰωσήφ μοναχοῦ τοῦ Βρυεννίου τὰ εὐρεθέντα*, I (Leipzig, 1768), p. 109.

66. J. le Goff, *Les intellectuels au moyen âge* (Paris, 1957), *passim*; H. Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London, 1965), pp. 136–7.

and write did not mark out a man sharply from his fellows for life. Second, the existence of people who could read without having command of or perhaps interest in the difficult Hochsprache explains many features of the rise of vernacular Greek literature, e.g. the paraphrases of learned texts in easier—but not popular—language that we find from the thirteenth century and perhaps earlier, the failure of vernacular Greek from the fourteenth century to break out from ‘non-serious’ to serious literature, and so on. There were so many readers who could read literary Koine provided it was not too difficult, and the boundaries were not clear, as they were in the west, where reading Latin and reading, say, Old French were distinct accomplishments. In Byzantium children went on learning to read from Homer or more often from the Psalms—*ta hiera grammata*. Were there Byzantine schoolmasters who took the revolutionary step of teaching their pupils to read from vernacular texts? What are we to make of the declared purpose of the author of the poem on the Four Footed Beasts?

*ἵνα ἀναγινώσκωνται καὶ χρῶνται τὰυτα παῖδες
οἱ φοιτηταὶ καὶ νεαροὶ διὰ τὴν εὐνοσίταν?*⁶⁷

In discussing earlier drafts of the present paper with colleagues I have been impressed by two arguments pointing to the rarity of literacy in the Byzantine world. One is the infrequency of sepulchral inscriptions. If the ability to read was at all widespread, it is argued, surely they would have recorded the names of their dead on their tombstones, as the pagan Hellenic world did. This kind of argument is difficult to evaluate. Very few Byzantine tombstones, inscribed or not, have survived. Perhaps they were too easily removed and reused. Perhaps those who knew the deceased did not need to be reminded of his name, and later generations did not care. It is worth recalling that although the obits of the Archbishops and Metropolitans of Athens are carefully recorded on a column of the Parthenon, only one episcopal tombstone has been found, and that belongs to late antiquity rather than to the Byzantine

67. V. Tsiouni, *Παιδιόφραστος διήγησις τῶν ζώων τῶν τετραπόδων* (Munich, 1972), p. 59.

world.⁶⁸ The other argument turns on the alleged infrequency of graffiti on Byzantine buildings. But the fact of the matter is that no systematic study has ever been made of Byzantine graffiti. There are plenty of them in the narthex, gallery etc. of older churches. One example which springs to the mind is the gallery of the Church of Hagia Sophia at Ohrid, the wall of which is covered with graffiti. Perhaps some day the graffiti of certain Byzantine churches will be published with the care devoted to those of Hagia Sophia in Novgorod.⁶⁹ Until this is done it would seem premature to draw conclusions on the extent of Byzantine literacy.

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68. T. D. Neroutsos, *Χριστιανικὰ Ἀθῆναι*, *DIEE*, III (1890), 71.

69. Cf. A. A. Medyntseva, *Drevnerusskie nadpisi-graffiti XI–XIV vv. iz Novgorodskogo Sofijskogo sobora*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1977).

Addendum to n. 22: The Russian translation by M. V. Levčenko in *Sbornik dokumentov po sotsial'no-ekonomičeskoj istorii Vizantija* (Moscow, 1951), pp. 169–73, omits the list of the testator's books. Since this paper was sent to press a new critical edition of the Greek text together with a valuable study of Boilas' life and career has appeared in P. Lemerle, *Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977), pp. 15–63. Lemerle does not discuss Boilas' library.